Famous Poems of One Poem Men

By BURTON E. STEVENSON.

II. "Hoch! der Kaiser."

THE war which shook this planet for four long years and in whose backwash we are still struggling is habitually alluded to as the greatest in all history, but so far as this country is concerned, the war with Spain, comparatively insignificant as it was, surpassed it in at least two details: the world war inspired no poetry to equal William Vaughan Moody's "An Ode in Time of Hesitation," nor has it (to date) produced any sensation comparable with that which burst upon these United States on the night of April 21, 1899, when Capt. Joseph Bullock Coghlan of the cruiser Raleigh rose at a banquet given in his honor at the Union League Club in New York and recited "Hoch! der Kaiser."

The mists of twenty-three years have dimmed the memory of that incident and probably few of the younger generation ever heard of it, but it held column after column of front page space for days and days, rocked the country with mighty laughter, nearly involved us in a serious international complication and brought forth frenzied frothings in the German-American press.

This last circumstance might have given thoughtful men pause but for the comfortable theory every one had in those days that we were all loyal Americans, brothers living together in this land of plenty, ready to defend it against aggression from any quarter and to die for it if need be. Also there was another comfortable theory quite generally held that the Germans were a peaceful and home loving race, thoroughly good hearted and inoffensive, and that they were as much amused with their saber rattling, shining armored Kaiser as we were. Most of us looked upon the Kaiser as a joke; certainly few of us suspected that his people regarded him as a god and that many thousands of those people were even then living in the United States, under the protection of its laws and its flag.

The cruiser Raleigh, with Capt. Coghlan in command, had belonged to Admiral Dewey's squadron which steamed into Manila Bay on May 1, 1898, and sank the Spanish fleet. It had fired the first shot of the battle and it was the first ship of that squadron to be sent home. A mighty welcome greeted it when it entered New York harbor and on the evening of April 21 the Union League Club gave a banquet to its officers, headed by Capt. Coghlan. It was an elaborate affair, with Elihu Root as toastmaster and Chauncey Depew as one of the speakers. There were many courses, a great popping of corks and every one was very happy. Ah, welladay!

Mr. Root made the first speech and then called upon Capt. Coghlan. That gallant officer at first demurred on the ground that he had never made a speech and didn't know how, but at last he was prevailed upon to rise and tell the story of the battle. That story, of course, his hearers already knew, but what they did not know (since Admiral Dewey had kept it out of the dispatches) and heard for the first time was the story of the insolent behavior of the German squadron in Manila harbor, and its interference with Admiral Dewey's blockade orders. The climax of the story, as reported in the papers next day, ran something like this:

The German squadron was in command of Admiral von Diederich, and one night one of his staff officers, approaching the Olympia in a launch and refusing to stop when challenged, was fired upon and very nearly sunk. He climbed the Olympia's ladder in a high state of excitement.

"How dare you fire upon us?" he demanded. "We fly the German flag!"

"Those flags can be bought anywhere for a dollar and a half a yard," retorted Dewey. "Go back and tell your Admiral that the slightest infraction of any rule will mean but one thing—war! If your people are really ready for war with the United States, they can have it right now!"

"After that," Capt. Coghlan added, "the Germans didn't breathe more than three times consecutively without asking permission."

Now, of course, this was after dinner history rather than the sober article; it had a foundation in fact, but it was dressed up to suit the occasion—with the reference to the wholesale price of black, white and red bunting, for example. But it brought that audience to its feet with a wild roar of approval; there were three cheers for Capt. Coghlan, and then everybody joined with acclamations in the toast to Admiral Dewey which Capt. Coghlan proposed. Then the other officers gave short talks, and then somebody at the speakers' table called upon Capt. Coghlan to recite "Hoch! der Kaiser."

Again he demurred, saying it might give offense to some of the guests, but when everybody clapped and cheered and yelled for him to go ahead, he rose again and started on the soon-to-be famous lines:

Der Kaiser of dis Faterland
Und Gott on high all dings command,
Ve two—ach! don't you understand?
Myself—und Gott!

They were not famous then—very few of Capt. Coghlan's audience had ever heard them before—and while they evoked roars of laughter, it was not until the poem appeared in the papers next day that its rare satirical quality was really appreciated. It was so unfamiliar that there was considerable confusion about it. Some of the papers said it was a song and that the Captain had sung it—an aspersion which he indignantly denied. Nobody knew where it had come from. The *Staats-Zeitung*, in a boiling article, asserted that it "was composed by a Bowery bard as he lay before Manila," and gave this account of the incident:

"After Capt. Coghlan, Dewey's nephew, Lieut. Winder, spoke, but he was interrupted by some Jewish persons who asked Capt. Coghlan to sing the mocking song, 'Hoch! der Kaiser.' Capt. Coghlan, he of the eyeglasses, who could not see a German warship a thousand yards, sang the stupid, jeering song—in the Union League Club, amid loud applause." And the *Staats-Zeitung* goes on to denounce the Captain as impudent and his stories as absurd and brutal. He had been disrespectful to the Kaiser!

It is worth noting that Capt. Coghlan never took back a word of his story, merely explaining that he had told it in order that justice might be done to Admiral Dewey, and that half the truth about the battle of Manila was not yet known to the American people. He added that he knew nothing about the poem, except that he had heard it in the East, where it had been very popular among the men of his ship. He was kept busy for a while explaining other things to the Navy Department, and the Navy Department was also busy explaining, and the country at large (with the Germanophile exceptions aforesaid) was very happy over the affair—but all that need not be gone into here.

The day after the banquet the German Ambassador, Dr. von Holleben, called on Secretary Hay at the State Department. What transpired was not disclosed, but the attitude of the German Government was that it could not afford to overlook so gross and public an affront to the Emperor. Two days later a cablegram from Berlin stated that Secretary Hay had expressed to Dr. von Holleben his strong disapproval of Captain Coghlan's conduct. On April 27 Dr. von Holleben was received by President McKinley, who informed him that the Navy Department had administered a reprimand to Captain Coghlan, and Von Holleben expressed himself as satisfied. The German press was also satisfied, but ventured the hope that there would be no more such incidents to jeopardize the kindly feelings of Germany toward the United States. The last reference to Captain Coghlan is in the papers of October 1, which tell of a reception given in his honor at the Union League Club, at which he was warmly received.

The above facts have been gleaned from the public press. A letter to the Navy Department, asking for some information about the incident, brought the following remarkable response:

"A thorough search has been made of the official files of the department, including Admiral Coghlan's personal jacket, and no record whatever can be found of the incident of which you speak. I should have answered you before this, but we have been diligently trying to trace down some dim recollections of the incident as reported by some of the older persons in the Navy Department. I am sorry to say we have been able to find nothing, however."

Sic transit injuria mundi! Or perhaps Captain Coghlan was not reprimanded, after all!

But neither Wilhelm II. nor the German Ambassador, nor Secretary Hay, nor the Navy Department, nor all of them combined could suppress "Hoch! der Kaiser." That masterpiece had been lifted suddenly into immortality. It had found a fit interpreter at a supremely fit moment, and its fame was secure. Yet nobody knew the name of its author, or where it had first appeared. It was just one of those fugitive poems, those nameless orphans, which drift through the columns of the press, their origin shrouded in mystery, and which eventually drop from sight unless preserved for posterity by some such accident as had befallen this one.

Rodney Blake, which was a pseudonym used by William Montgomery Clemens, included it in a collection of "After-dinner Verse," and for a while he was credited with being its author. Then somebody claimed that it had been written by a wandering newspaperman named A. M. R. Gordon; but presently it was discovered that that, too, was a pseudonym. However, it was the pseudonym of the real author, Alexander Macgregor Rose, and the whole story at last came out of Montreal, Canada, where Rose had written the poem during the last year of his life, and where he had died.

It is an everlasting pity that "Hoch! der Kaiser" does not belong to American literature, but it was written by a Scotchman, and first appeared in the columns of the *Daily Herald* of Montreal, Canada. It is to the editor of the *Herald* that the present writer is indebted for most of the following information about Rose's life.

Alexander Macgregor Rose was born in the village of Tomantoul, South Banffshire, Scotland, on August 7, 1846. After attending the village school, he went to the grammar school at Aberdeen, where in 1863 he gained the Macpherson bursary of twenty pounds. He entered the University of Aberdeen the same year, and finished his arts course in the spring of 1867. During the next three years he was classical master at boarding schools in different parts of England, and in 1870 was appointed master of the Free Church School of Gairlock, Rossshire. Soon afterward he began the study of divinity, and in 1875 was licensed as a minister. His reputation seems to have been excellent, for almost immediately, on September 9, 1875, he was ordained as minister of the Free Church of Evie and Randall, at Orkney.

And here we come to the great tragedy of Rose's life.

Up to this point his life reads like a chapter out of the biography of any eminent Scotsman: an orderly progress, persistent, thoroughly Scotch, through school and college to the natural and inevitable haven of the church; studious and laborious years leading to the ministry at the age of twenty-nine—a good age, neither so young as to be foolish, nor so old as to feel oneself slipping behind in the battle of life; a position respected and influential, assuring a comfortable livelihood, and thoroughly congenial to one of scholarly tastes. So the future of the Reverend Alexander Macgregor Rose seemed to stretch fair and straight before him, along a predestined and thoroughly Presbyterian path.

But four years later he cast all this aside, changed his name to Gordon, forswore the ministry, and became a wanderer upon the face of the earth.

No one knew why—at least no one in America. In Orkney, of course, the affair created an immense sensation, as any scandal connected with the church was certain to do; but, so far as the present writer knows, Rose never referred to it, and the friends whom he made over here had to content themselves with guesses. All of them, naturally, were tinged with romance. It was variously suggested that a woman had betrayed him, that doubt had assailed him, that his wife (if he had one) deserted him. It was evident enough that, whatever the tragedy, it had shaken him to the depths, for he fled not only from his home but from his pro-

Hoch! der Kaiser

Der Kaiser of dis Faterland
Und Gott on high all dings command,
Ve two—ach! don't you understand?
Myself—und Gott.

Vile some men sing der power divine,
Mine soldiers sing "Der Wacht am Rhine,"
Und drink der health in Rhenish wine
Of me—und Gott.

Dere's France, she swaggers all aroundt;
She's ausgespield, of no account,
To much we dink she don't amount;
Myself—und Gott.

She will not dare to fight again,
But if she shouldt, I'll show her blain
Dot Elsass und (in French) Lorraine
Are mein—by Gott!

Dere's grandma dinks she's nicht smâll beer,
Mit Boers und such she interfere;
She'll learn none owns dis hemisphere,
But me—und Gott.

She dinks, good frau, fine ships she's got
Und soldiers mit der scarlet goat.
Ach! ve could knock dem! Pouf! Like dot,
Myself—mit Gott!

In dimes of peace brepare for wars,
I bear de spear und helm of Mars,
Und care not for a dousand Czars,
Myself—mit Gott!

In fact, I humor efery whim,
Mit aspect dark und visage grim;
Gott pulls mit me, und I mit him,
Myself—und Gott!

ALEXANDER MACGREGOR ROSE.